

Speculative Realms

TUESDAY, APRIL 20, 2010

The Argument from Ignorance and Skeptical Omniscience

I was listening to the Skepticity Podcast the other day and they kept harping on how "believers" always use the argument from ignorance to justify their belief in aliens.

The [argument from ignorance](#) basically sounds like this:

"Well, we don't know Aliens don't exist. As well, just because we don't know how to travel faster than the speed of light doesn't mean the aliens don't know either."

The problem with the skeptical position is that humans tend to look pretty authoritative concerning what can and can't be done. In other words, to argue against the argument from ignorance is to make humans out to be know-it-alls. Along those same lines, it is no accident that science tends to attract know-it-alls.

There is a long tradition, in fact, in scientific inquiry of bunkering oneself into the known. This bunker mentality is why people like [Tesla](#) and [Faraday](#) had to operate from the fringe. Outsiders like Tesla and Faraday faced a lot of hazing in their day. That they managed to get anything done in the face of all that [luddite](#) scientific resistance is amazing in and of itself.

Skeptics therefore are suggesting we project the limitations of human knowledge onto the theoretical alien other. This is anthropomorphic authoritarianism. In other words, man is not only the measure, man is the authority. If man says it isn't possible, by God, it isn't possible.

I can't dunk a basketball. Therefore, LeBron James can't dunk a basketball. True or false? Am I hallucinating when I see LeBron James dunk the basketball? He is not really dunking that basketball.

The opposite of the argument from ignorance is the argument from omniscience. The only problem is, if humans are so omniscient why are things so messed up on this planet?

In point of fact, the belief in human omniscience is precisely the religious belief the skeptics adopt to argue against an alien other. To omniscience believers, there is no other. There is just self and what the self knows. The self doesn't know how to send a ship to another solar system so how can any other self know how to do it?

The argument from omniscience is another form of the argument from ignorance. The difference is the argument from omniscience is egomaniac and based on unproven religious bias. Is there any evidence humans are omniscient? I'd like to ask skeptics to present the evidence.

There is plenty of evidence, on the other hand, of human ignorance. That gives the argument from ignorance a basis in reality.

The argument from omniscience has no basis in reality. It is the kind of grandiosity you are supposed to have gotten rid of in AA meetings. I guess the Skeptics are still in denial.

If the skeptics think we are going to get anywhere in science, religion, or ethics, arguing from our own omniscience, they are in for a bigger shock than any jolt an alien visitation might provide them.

But they say to sober up you have to hit bottom, right?

Posted by Gary Haden at 7:01 AM 

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10 comments:



Deirdre said...

I'm really enjoying your articles.

April 21, 2010 2:03 AM



Gary Haden said...

Thanks, Deirdre.

Thanks for the link to your blog, too. It looks really good. It has some nice toys on it.

I tried Wordpress but I couldn't function in it.

I thought I recognized your picture. I'll put your RSS feed in my sidebar.

Suggestions, advice, and cookies are welcome.

April 21, 2010 6:44 AM



Skepticality said...

Umm,

For something to even be taken seriously as 'plausible' when it comes to extraordinary claims, such as Aliens, Ghosts, Chi, Auras, Telepathy, etc, you have to test it using the scientific method.

This absolutely nothing to do with arguing from 'omniscience', just hard fact. Produce some evidence, test it, make assumptions and predictions based on the evidence, rinse and repeat.

If you can't even get as far as the first step. Then, no, you won't get anywhere in the real world.

April 22, 2010 8:28 AM



CW said...

I don't think it's an argument from ignorance to belief in what Carl Sagan stated (paraphrase): "extraordinary events require extraordinary evidence."

Thus, if you're going to tell me that something has to break what we've established in the laws of physics (faster than light travel), or the implausibility of interstellar spacetravel (distances, radiation, etc.) then I want to see more proof than blurry photographs and anecdotal evidence.

April 22, 2010 8:41 AM



chrisw10 said...

This post has been removed by the author.

April 22, 2010 9:14 AM



chrisw10 said...

Actually, Skepticality, I think you would be remiss if you didn't concede that a paradigm of physicalism was operating in what you just said about the nature of evidence.

Here's a far more mundane example. You cannot use the scientific method to prove the scientific method, or you beg the question—another kind of fallacy.

What you said about the nature of evidence is not scientifically testable in your view. It's a metaphysical assumption you are borrowing from a different worldview.

Now, I happen to think the author misses the mark on the example of alien visitation he used simply because it's not a question of skeptics' omniscience or ignorance, but a question of what we know about the laws of physics; that they can't supersede other laws of physics and that the ones we do know about prohibit faster than light travel. It's an abductive conclusion based on the evidence we have available. In other words, this conclusion, at least, that aliens can't visit our world due to the limitations of physics, is a reasonable one and not based on any fallacious reasoning. In that sense, you are right.

April 22, 2010 9:16 AM



joreth said...

There's a difference between "I don't understand how that could happen, therefore it can't possibly happen" and "based on everything we know about

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physics that has been tested and retested and evaluated and makes accurate predictions, we're pretty sure this isn't possible within the framework of the laws we have so far established.

One says "I don't know, therefore no", the other says "We DO know no" and is provisional until new data comes along.

One is a logical fallacy, the other is a reasonable, provisional, acceptance of the facts.

April 22, 2010 12:35 PM



Regan Lee said...

I've been enjoying your posts on Emma Woods/Jacobs, and now this: wow. Great post, thank you.

April 22, 2010 5:36 PM



Skepticity said...

@chrisw10 Test the scientific method to prove it? Sorry, but that is already inherent in the fact that it is already self-evident.

April 23, 2010 1:42 AM



Gary Haden said...

I still think we're awfully proud of what we know and the anthropocentrism and egocentrism involved in that pride is deleterious to any acquisition of evidence.

We still need evidence.

Welcome, Skepticity.

April 24, 2010 8:09 AM

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